

Beauty or the Beast: The Depiction of the Physically Challenged in Literature from an Adlerian Perspective

Irma Jacqueline Ozer

The television scripts for the CBS TV series "Beauty and the Beast" furnished a dramatic example of the application of Alfred Adler's major psychological teaching. Dr. Adler stated in his writings¹ that individuals with physical defects cope with the feelings of inferiority arising from this defect (whether real or imagined) by either the compensation inherent in superior achievements and nobility of character or by the decompensation of dysfunctionality and asocial behavior. Vincent, the half-man/half-beast of the aforementioned series possessed the psychic powers and phenomenal strength to repeatedly rescue the beautiful heroine from danger. Moreover, the misshapen hero was cultured and brilliant, quoting poetry from Rilke to "Beauty."

The character of Vincent in "Beauty and the Beast" by no means represents an exception among the portrayals of the physically challenged. In world literature, from ancient times to the present, the physically challenged have predominantly been depicted in extreme psychological terms—as Beauty OR the Beast. When analyzing the portrayals of this group of people in novels, stories and plays, it is vital to bear in mind the fact that a work of fiction is by nature hyperbolic. It must compress a world of ideas between the first and last page. Hence, the plot and the characters emerge with more intensity than do events and individuals in real-life situations. The Adlerian depiction of physically challenged persons may therefore be vindicated. First of all, it achieves a powerful effect, bringing across the message of the work thus more strikingly. Secondly, it fulfills a didactic function. When a challenged character is sympathetic and even admirable, the reader may discover that the exterior of a human being does not necessarily reflect the inner person. Professor Leslie Fiedler² observes that physically challenged villains are projections of people's paranoid horror at the sight of deformity and of the conviction that this deformity is an outward symbol of inner evil. Long John Silver in R. L.

Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick* and the dwarf Quilp in Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop* are offered as examples to support the scholar's assertions.

Let us now view, from an Adlerian perspective, various physically challenged heroes and heroines in literature from Ancient Greece to the present. I have selected characters with different challenges because the deformed, the lame, the blind and the deaf experience varying reactions to their respective "defects."

The category of physical challenge most widely written about in fiction is probably the deformed. (I cite the cyclops in mythology and the dwarf and humpback in fairy tales as evidence of the ubiquitousness of this typus.) An example of a negative Adlerian figure is Richard III in Shakespeare's play "Richard III." The following monologue will demonstrate that the protagonist's hatred and resolve to be a villain are reactions to the societal rejection he experiences.

Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on my own deformity:
and therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
and hate the idle pleasure of these days.³

John Dover Wilson, in his introduction to the 1954 Cambridge University Press edition of the play, points out that "there is a perpetual reference to his own powers and capacities by which he is able to surmount these petty objections; and the joy of a defect conquered."⁴ Power-hungry and destructive, Richard III manifests his form of compensation in a totally negative way.

Quasimodo of Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, on the other hand, emerges as heroic. He saves the gypsy Esmerelda from execution out of gratitude because she had once given him water when the crowd had persecuted him. Quasimodo shows morality on a remarkable level when he discovers that his adoptive father Dom Claude has ordered Esmerelda's execution in retaliation for her rejection of his sexual advances. The hunchback, despite his sense of loyalty to Dom Claude, saves Esmerelda from being raped by the evil priest. It is significant to mention that the very people who had once tormented Quasimodo experience a transformation in attitude towards him when they see him rescue Esmerelda.

The women laughed and wept; the crowd stamped their feet enthusiastically, for at that moment Quasimodo was really beautiful. He was handsome—this orphan, this foundling, this outcast . . . And then there was something touching about the protection offered by a creature so deformed to one so unfortunate—one condemned to death saved by Quasimodo. Here were two extremes of physical and social wretchedness meeting and assisting each other.⁵

The hunchback is also transformed from within. His relationship with the gypsy changes him from a "Beast" into a "Beauty." In Adlerian terms, he compensated for his defects in the acts of courage and love.

In contrast to the revulsion and suspicion which frequently confront the deformed, pity and sentimentality are common reactions to the lame and non-ambulatory. (The depiction of Tiny Tim in Dickens' "The Christmas Carol" and of Laura in Tennessee Williams' "Glass Menagerie" provide examples of evoking reader/audience pity and tenderness.) Nevertheless, there are figures in literature who are lame and also highly unsympathetic. For example, Brian Casey in Wilfred Sheed's novel *People Will Always Be Kind* exploits his lame condition to arouse pity. He deliberately plays upon people's sympathy and gloats about it. A memorable example of a manipulative non-ambulatory character in fiction is the beautiful Madeline Neroni in *Barchester Towers*, a 19th century novel by Anthony Trollope. Madeline is unique, or at least very rare, because beauty and seductiveness are not attributes usually linked with physically challenged persons. The heroine of Trollope's book is able to stand up but refuses to do so. She insists upon being carried everywhere. Lying on the sofa at a party, Madeline Neroni is in total command, as the following passage will illustrate:

Her ambition was to create a sensation, to have parsons at her feet, seeing that the manhood of Barchester consisted mainly of parsons, and to send, if possible, every parson's wife home with a green fit of jealousy. None could be too old for her and hardly any too young. None too sanctified and none too worldly. She was quite prepared to entrap the bishop himself, and then to turn up her nose at the bishop's wife. She did not doubt of her success, for she had always succeeded . . .⁶

It is clear that Madeline sadistically uses her beauty and immobility as weapons to disrupt the orderly lives of the Victorian community. She is thus a case of decompensation. A similar situation is to be found in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." In this short story, the protagonist Joy Hulga Hopewell uses her high intelligence and her doctorate to intimidate others. She is also lame and fails to compensate for her challenge constructively.

A lame protagonist who evinces positive compensation is Philip Carey in Somerset Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage*. A clubfoot, Philip experiences at his mother's funeral the condescension which would create in him a sense of inferiority from early childhood on.

"Poor little boy, it's dreadful to think of him quite alone in the world. I see he limps."
"Yes, he's got a club-foot. It was such a grief to his mother."⁷

Thus, Philip's earliest perception of himself is as a burden and a defective human being.

After a tormented adolescence at a school where he is known as "a club-footed blockhead," Philip studies to become a doctor. During his student years he becomes obsessed with a waitress. Although Philip recognizes that Mildred

will never return his love, he cannot keep himself from returning to her again and again for more humiliation. (Mildred's cruelty to Philip is reminiscent of the inhumanness shown by a woman to a hunchbacked dwarf in Thomas Mann's novella "Der kleine Herr Friedemann.")

Philip Carey subsequently meets a young woman whose love and respect enable him to extricate himself from his long bondage to Mildred. In the person of Philip we have a double compensation process. The actual physical challenge is overcome by his becoming a doctor and healing others. The emotional scars of the years of torment and rejection are overcome when Philip is able to end his relationship with Mildred and enter into a healthy, reciprocated partnership with another woman.

This concludes the discussion of lame protagonists. We now turn to the one category of physically challenged literary figure which enjoys respect and even awe: The blind. Sight is replaced by insight and foresight. The blind prophet Teiresias appears in both "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone," major Greek tragedies written by Sophocles. In these dramatic works, the blind man assumes the function of a Jeremiah who warns in vain of impending disasters. The scholar C. M. Bowra tells us in his text *Sophoclean Tragedy*⁸ that Teiresias represents the gods when he warns Creon in "Antigone" not to insult the dead. He foretells the loss of Creon's son in requital for the unburied Polynices. Sophocles himself called Teiresias "the lord who *sees* as the lord Phoebus sees," according to Alister Cameron's analysis of "Oedipus Rex" in *The Identity of Oedipus the King: Five Essays on the Oedipus Tyrannus*.⁹ Cameron points out that when Oedipus taunts the old prophet for his blindness, Teiresias tells the king that although he (Oedipus) possesses sight, he does not *see* where he is in misfortune nor where he lies and with whom he dwells. The compensation exhibited by the blind seer consists in his developing in lieu of eyesight an uncanny second sight. The tragedy is that the great compensatory achievement is ignored by the very people who could be saved by it. The special perceptiveness of blind persons in literature is emphasized by Paul Robinson in his response to Leslie Fiedler's comments on the challenged in literature.¹⁰ Robinson cites, among a number of significant examples of this perceptiveness, the heroine of Andre Gide's "The Pastoral Symphony" and the hero of D. H. Lawrence's short story "The Blind Man."

A depiction of blind characters who display a negative form of compensation occurs in H. G. Wells' short story "The Country of the Blind." Here we have an entire society of challenged persons as opposed to the usual individual character. Wells' tale emerges as a satire on the cultural assumptions of the able-bodied who feel that they are superior and hence have the right to establish norms and standards. When a sighted man, who has lost his way and been wandering for days, is taken in by the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind, the traditional relationship between the able-bodied and the challenged is deftly

reversed. Nunez, the sighted protagonist, learns that day and night are determined by heat and cold rather than by light and darkness. In this culture, the One-eyed Man is king. When the hero falls in love with his master's daughter, the citizens decide that he must have an operation which will make him like them and change his absurdly distended features which move and hence irritate his brain. Of course, this means that his eyes are to be surgically removed. Nunez runs away rather than submit to this fate. Eli Bower, in his text entitled *The Handicapped in Literature*, comments on Wells' story as follows:

Several significant concepts related to the field of the handicapped surface in the story. One is that of deviance and its counterpart, normality. Then there are concepts relating to culture, culture shock, and the behavior of persons who move from one cultural assumption to another.¹¹

"The Country of the Blind" is actually more a sociological than a psychological study. Still, we see both positive and negative compensation. When the blind citizens develop their other senses to a very high level, it is a positive process. However, when they react like condescending and intolerant majorities toward Nunez, their form of compensation is clearly a negative one.

Before we approach the depiction of the deaf in literature, it is relevant at this juncture to mention the successful play "The Miracle Worker" by William Gibson. The inspiring impact can be attributed to the fact that Helen Keller, both blind and deaf, was already world-famous for her triumph over her challenges. In Gibson's portrayal we have an example of a positive form of compensation in a person with multiple challenges.

The deaf are not generally associated in literature with nefarious deeds or with nobility. The deaf mute, widely referred to as "deaf and dumb," has often been erroneously considered stupid. Only in recent decades have novels, plays, film and television scripts been dealing with the anger which many deaf people harbor towards the hearing world. One example of this new development is Mark Howard Medoff's highly acclaimed play (and later film script) "Children of a Lesser God." Television series, such as the CBS hit "The Equalizer," also explore the problems confronting the deaf and the necessity for a better communication between this challenged group and the hearing. I shall conclude my presentation with a deaf protagonist who is exceptional among literary figures in the remarkable level of positive compensation he evinces. John Singer in Carson McCullers' novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* becomes the friend and confidante to a few unhappy people living in a small Southern town. The solitary Mr. Singer assumes different identities according to the needs of the respective individual who is confiding in him. Although Singer never says a word, his compassion is shown in notes and gifts. However, what the deaf man really feels remains a mystery and nobody seems concerned. The reader, on the other hand, knows from the beginning of the novel that John Singer had lived in a rented room with a deaf friend, a fat, mildly retarded

Greek man named Antonopoulos. When his eccentric roommate is institutionalized, Singer moves to the town which becomes the main arena of action in the plot. At the conclusion of the story, Singer discovers on a visit to the hospital that Antonopoulos has died. Griefstricken, the deaf man, who had never revealed his loneliness to others, shoots himself and dies. The people who had leaned upon him are incredulous and overwhelmed with sorrow. Now we come to the question of how John Singer fits into the pattern of Adlerian compensation: His rising above his challenge occurs in a quiet, unspectacular manner. When he lets others speak to him - while he is deprived of the same release—he transcends, or compensates for, his deafness. He could have written to the people who confided in him and expressed his loneliness. However, he understood that their need was greater. Thus, he was the stronger one. A brief quote from the novel will suffice to show how the townspeople saw Singer:

He sat very still with his hands in his pockets, and because he did not speak it made him seem superior. What did that fellow think and realize? What did he know?¹²

In this instance, a deaf person is not perceived as “dumb” because he is silent. Instead, Singer is credited with wisdom and profundity. I believe that this interpretation of Singer’s silence can be attributed to his great kindness and gentleness. Thus, the compensation by Singer affects others’ attitudes towards him.

Having surveyed a number of literary works which portray the challenged from an Adlerian perspective, it is fitting to raise the question: Should contemporary and future literature continue this prevalent mode of depiction? I reiterate the advantages: The psychological extremes enhance the dramatic effect of fiction and bring across the message more powerfully. Moreover, the reader, after becoming acquainted with a challenged protagonist who compensates positively, will see that an imperfect body may house a noble soul.

On the other hand, literature should also progress with the times and reflect a changing reality. During the past two decades, disability rights organizations have been educating the public regarding the physically challenged. We thus have the opportunity to view people—in the past defined in extreme terms—as human beings like ourselves. Film and television have played a significant role in altering public consciousness. Let me cite just a few examples of movies and television dramas and series which have portrayed the challenged as people with whom most of the audience can identify—in other words, not as saints or as villains. The movie “Mask”; the television drama “Can You Feel Me Dancing”; the television series “Cagney and Lacey,” “Highway to Heaven,” and “Different Strokes” have portrayed physically challenged protagonists as appealing, believable and often funny. Because these characters are *not* “too good to be true,” they are accessible. It is this ACCESSIBILITY

which will ultimately make the able-bodied feel comfortable with the challenged.

Owing to changing social attitudes, many physically challenged persons no longer suffer from a feeling of inferiority. Thus, the need for compensation is lessening. I believe, for this reason, that the literature of the present and the future should portray the deformed, the lame, the blind and the deaf in the same psychological terms as it portrays able-bodied figures. However, I also hold that literature should be a step ahead of real progress—hence, “utopian.” In this utopian literature, I can envision men, women and children who are physically challenged but not depicted in the extreme Adlerian perspective. They would simply be part of the flowing continuum of what we know as “normal.”

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